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THE VALLEY OF THE UPPER EUPHRATES RIVER AND ITS PEOPLE.*

BY

ELLSWORTH HUNTINGTON.

THE ASHIRETS OR CLANS—FEUDS.—Among the mountains the Kuzzilbash defy the Government, and know no law except that of the aghas of their own ashirets or tribes. Petty feuds are continually in progress, so that every one carries a gun, either an old flintlock or a modern Martini. At times of feud only the priestly class of Sehids are safe from attack, and so the business of conducting travellers and trains of pack animals is wholly in their hands. The Kurdish ashirets closely resemble the Scotch clans of four or five centuries ago. In September, 1901, I crossed their stronghold, Dersim, but was unable to penetrate into the very wildest part, because there were so many feuds in progress that even the Sehids dared not venture into such an excited region. The first noon our party reached Pertag, three miles north of the Euphrates River, at the foot of the southern range of Dersim, where a series of splendid clear, cold springs gush out from the hot white limestone mountains and embower the village in trees and vines. We had to wait an hour or two to get a new escort from the Government. While we were sitting on a little mattress, which the villagers with characteristic politeness had spread on the bare ground in the shade of the useful mulberry trees, and were enjoying one of the watermelons, with yellow flesh and brown seeds, which grow so well here on the irrigated terraces, a man, hot and breathless, came running up to the soldiers' quarters. There was hurrying here and there, taking down of guns, mounting of horses, and hastening away. A ragged cavalryman unwillingly stopped long enough to say that three or four hundred sheep and goats belonging to the village had been grazing on the mountain side an hour's journey away, when some Kuzzilbash came down and drove them off, just as the Scotch Highlanders used to raid the Lowlands long ago. One shepherd was killed and the rest fled. As we rode away from the village we passed groups of Turkish villagers going out with their guns to take vengeance on the Kurds, whose black tents we later saw in the distance. The next morning we passed a village whose

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Agha had lately been murdered at the instigation of a neighbouring Bey or feudal lord. The Agha's tribesmen were on the warpath ready to kill and rob at sight, so that our single escort was exceedingly nervous. We saw no further signs of violence, but the Government insisted on insuring our safety by furnishing us with an escort of from five to sixteen soldiers.

At another time, among the Zazas, I hired a guide to go a day's journey, but after a few hours he said that he must turn back and wanted his money. I insisted on his continuing with us in spite of his frequent appeals, until at last we came in sight of a distant village. Then he got down on his knees and implored me to let him go, because if the men of that village caught him they would surely shoot him. His distress was so genuine that I paid him off and dismissed him after making him tell why they would kill him. Some months before the guide's fellow-villagers had stolen a girl from the village before us and given her to one of their young men, so that now there is a deadly feud between the two villages. Such events are by no means rare, and even take place among Turks as well as Kurds.

THE FEUDAL BEYS, OR LORDS.—Besides the Ashirets, or clans, there are in certain places genuine feudal lords, called "Beys," who have absolute power over the villages around them. They are sometimes Turks and sometimes Kurds, and their serfs may belong to either of these races, or be Armenians. Except in the wilder mountain regions, where the Kurds still resist the Government, the power of the Beys has been broken. Where they are still semi-independent they treat their retainers rigorously, and are said even to put them to death, but will not allow any one else to misuse them. One morning one of these lords, whose guest I had been, gave me as guide a man whom he had obliged to work all day in the wheat field and to turn the winnowing machine all night, and who was now to go with me as far as I chose, which was not far. Yet, when a villager nearby stole a mule, and soldiers were sent to recover it, the thief's Bey called out his men and was ready to fight, but the governor thought it wise to let the matter drop. The Beys have as many feuds as do the Ashirets. One on whom I called, said:

"Oh yes, we fight more or less. I and my two brothers lose eight or ten men every year in fighting with our uncle in the next village."

Some of the houses, although built largely of mud, are more or less fortified. At the house of the man who gave me the tired

guide I slept on a mud roof—the most comfortable place in summer—which was surrounded by a thick mud wall, loopholed for musketry.

PATRIARCHAL GOVERNMENT AMONG THE NOMADS.—Another form of government, of which I have seen but little, prevails more or less among the nomadic Kurds—viz., the patriarchal. Most of the mountain Kurds are shepherds, and in summer leave their villages in the valleys and build booths of leaves, or pitch their black goats' hair tents high up beside some mountain spring. The real nomads, however, migrate from the plains of Mesopotamia to the mountains in the spring and back in the fall, and live all the time in coarse, black tents, which are doubtless the same as those used by Abraham four thousand years ago. The head of the family, the patriarch, puts up his tent in the best place, and all around are pitched those of his sons, nephews, and retainers. He entertains you right royally with bread, which the women bake on heated stones before the tent, with milk, either fresh or soured to a refreshing beverage, with cheese and butter churned in the early morning in a sheepskin suspended from a pole, and with the meat of a tender kid, which he pulls to pieces with his fingers, and then offers the fattest pieces to the foreigner—the guest of honour. He rules his people absolutely; but they seem to be happy and prosperous, and are free from all interference from outsiders.

THE FOUR STAGES OF CIVILIZATION AMONG THE KURDS—VIZ.:
(1) THE PATRIARCHAL SYSTEM; (2) THE CLAN SYSTEM; (3) THE FEUDAL SYSTEM; (4) ABSOLUTE MONARCHY.—Thus among the Kurds four stages may be found, and each is more or less dependent on the physical environment, and in each the character of the people is somewhat different. Lowest in the scale of development are those nomadic shepherds who are under a patriarchal government. They live where rain is rare, and the air warm, and leave the mountains when the inclement winter approaches. They seem to be brave and happy, but have no incentive to progress, and their code of morals in the broader sense is utterly different from that of civilized races. Each large family is a law unto itself, and comes in contact with its neighbours but little. Strangers are received and entertained, but they are also robbed, betrayed, and killed.

Next come the Ashirets or clans, originally nomads, as it appears, whom invaders have driven into the remoter mountain valleys, whence it is difficult to migrate every year, and where the rigour of winter compels them to build permanent villages of mud

and stone. The old nomadic habit still persists, but now the migrations are of only a few miles—to the neighbouring mountains, and the fields in the valley bottoms around the villages can be cultivated even while the fat-tailed sheep are being cared for on the grassy uplands. The clansmen, like the nomads, gave me the impression of being light-hearted, brave, and happy, even though they are always in danger. Their loyalty is to the village and clan, and they have an intense love for their homes. It was one of these people who said to my servant:

“Why does this man come here and ‘write the mountains’? We know that our land is the most beautiful in all the world. Does he want to tell his own people about it, so that they can come and take it?”

With the love for their homes has developed more of a sense of honour and responsibility than is found among the nomads. To be sure, they rob and kill at sight; but, nevertheless, their word can be relied on, and their hospitality is genuine.

Their care for their guests is shown by the somewhat misplaced kindness of an old Agha whom I visited three or four times at his lofty mountain camp. The first night when I went to bed he noticed that I not only took off my hat, but lay down to sleep without covering my head. He protested, saying that it was cold there on the mountains; the Kurds always kept on their turbans, and covered their heads, too; I should be sick. But I was obdurate. Sitting down on his mattress, at the foot of mine, he waited nearly half an hour, and then came and looked at me to see if I were asleep, which I pretended to be. That was what he wanted; getting a great quilt, three inches thick, he threw it over my head, and lay down to sleep, contented. He was determined that his guest should not suffer. I waited till he was quiet, and then pushed the quilt aside.

The next class, the feudal Kurds, are much like those of the Ashirets, but are often willing to take money for their hospitality—a thing which the others consider a deep disgrace. The Beys live near the edges of the mountains, and their people are largely employed in agriculture, although many sheep are kept. The serfs have learned the lesson of obedience, but it is to only one man.

The Kurds of the fourth class, who are under the absolute government of the Sultan, have learned the same lesson, although their obedience is not to one master, but to the many petty officials who make their life a burden. They live in the more accessible regions, and are avaricious, treacherous, and ignorant. The Ar-

menians have their quicker wits to help them: the Turks belong to the dominant race; but the Kurds are without protection, except as oppression goads them to resistance.

THE INFLUENCE OF ENVIRONMENT—ARCHAIC CUSTOMS.—The other two races, Turks and Armenians, live occasionally among the mountains, like the Kurds, but more commonly they keep to the plains. They have been often described, and are quite well known, but it may be of interest to describe a few traits, or habits, which illustrate either the influence of natural environment or the slowness with which old customs are laid aside. The external conditions of life have for thousands of years remained so uniform that there has been no incentive to progress and invention.

CHANGES IN LAKE GYULJUK AND THEIR EFFECT ON THE NEIGHBOURING VILLAGES.—An exception to the last statement, and at the same time a proof of its truth, is found in the region of Lake Gyuljuk, which has been already mentioned as lying in the neck of a great bend of the Euphrates River at the point where the Taurus Mountains are most passable. Although the narrow lake is now about twelve miles long and seven hundred feet deep, oral tradition and written record show that one or two thousand years ago its site was a plain, through which flowed a stream that disappeared by a subterranean outlet at the lower end. It appears that this outlet became clogged, and the water began to accumulate, forming a lake which year by year rose higher and higher, covering village after village, until finally the last village took refuge on a hill whose top was crowned by a monastery. Still the water rose higher; the hill became an island, and the villagers were obliged to take refuge on a broad gravelly fan delta opposite the island, on the mainland, at the foot of the steep mountains. In 1878, when the water had reached the monastery, it overflowed to the Tigris, and its rise was stopped. The poor villagers had lost their fertile fields, and, as almost no flat land remained, were obliged to satisfy themselves with the rugged mountain side, where a few terraces and less steep slopes were turned into wheatfields, while the steeper of the soil-covered slopes furnished a precarious foothold for vineyards. Even now the poor exiles complain bitterly of the greedy lake which has robbed them of their patrimony. The lake, however, was full of fish, which must be caught and used, since the scanty fields were unable to supply sufficient food. Some enterprising villagers from Gyuljuk, the largest village on the lake, and the only one inhabited by Armenians, went to Constantinople, and there learned how boats

are made. On returning, they built several—clumsy, to be sure, but immensely in advance of the primitive indigenous means of navigation. A few boats were built for neighbouring Kurdish villages; but these are now in ruins, partly because the Kurds are not so clever as the Armenians, and partly because the former have larger fields. The Armenian boats are kept in repair, and new ones are built. The fish are caught in nets at night.

During July, when the young fish, about five inches long, feed in great shoals along the shore, men, women, and children are busy catching them. A little rectangular pen of stones is built, extending three or four feet out from the shore, and at the ends of the outer wall two openings are left, outside one of which a net is placed so that it lies flat on the lake bottom, but can be raised so that the mouth covers the opening in the wall and the bag floats out behind. The innocent little fish come in through the openings, and are busily feeding, when they see two monstrous men before the only places of exit. One makes a great splashing, but the other seems quiet and harmless, so the fish all dash for the opening near the quiet man; but, alas! he has raised the net, and all the shiny little fellows are taken prisoner. They are put on strings and hung from racks on the flat mud roofs, where they remain all through August. In this hot, rainless season they dry without decomposing, and become like smoked herring. During August all the houses seem from a distance to be covered with great piles of brush, but an overwhelming odour forewarns the traveller of what he soon sees—that the brush bears fish, not leaves.

In still other ways the lake has changed the habits of the people. Thousands of birds frequent it—ducks, plover, gulls, pelicans, storks, and snipe—and are sometimes caught. On an island a few acres in extent, at the east end of the lake, among the rocks of a deserted and ruined Kurdish village, thousands of gulls lay their eggs, and furnish the people with a very cheap article of diet during May. Then, too, the people of Gyuljuk are far more in touch with the world than are their neighbours a few miles away, because of the visitors who come to the lake. Some day, under more favourable conditions, the beauty of the despised lake will make the villagers rich.

PRIMITIVE MODES OF TRAVEL ON THE RIVERS.—On Assyrian monuments of 1000 B. C., or older, there are representations of rafts made of inflated sheepskins, and of men crossing the water on single inflated skins, with which they supported their bodies, while they swam with their feet. At the present time such rafts

are the only means of navigation on the Euphrates River and its branches, except at some of the larger ferries. No attempt is made to go up stream, although in summer the current is very slow in many places. For thousands of years the habits of the people have remained unaltered. When they wish to cross the river to market a raft of skins is sufficient for the men, and the animals can swim alongside. If the river is high and dangerous, business can wait a week or two. In 1901 I floated two hundred and fifty miles on such rafts and saw no other means of locomotion, with the exception already noted. To be sure, I saw a raft of logs, on which sat almost naked Kurds, with strings of dried gourds around their waists for life-preservers and wooden tridents for paddles. But this was not a means of transportation; it was merely the easiest way of getting the logs to the place where they were to be used. At the main ferries there is what I suppose to be a relatively modern innovation in the shape of exceedingly clumsy, square-cornered wooden boats. They are low in front, in order that animals and, in the few cases where wagon roads have been built, wagons may enter. The stern is high and overhanging, with a high platform, on which stands the steersman, who manipulates the mighty rudder, which is as long as the boat. Two rough planks, with rounded handles, are tied to pins close to the front of the boat, and serve as oars. Of course these boats are carried far down stream before they can reach the opposite side, and have to be towed up stream along the bank—a very long and tedious process. Occasionally they are carried several miles down stream, or get stuck on sand bars in the middle of the swollen river.

ATTITUDE TOWARDS FOREIGNERS.—Another mark of the primitive character of the people is their suspicion of foreigners, who are known as “hat-wearers.” In floating down the Euphrates River with two American companions we passed Maden, the seat of a local governor. The advent of foreigners is so rare that the fact of our having floated past the town was reported to this official, who, in turn, telegraphed the news to the palace in Constantinople, and asked for instructions. From the Palace a message was at once sent, not to the local governor but to the Governor-General, telling him to find out who the “hat-wearers” were and what they wanted.

We floated down the river, because it was an opportunity for new exploration, and held out a promise, amply fulfilled, of affording interesting geological results, fine scenery, and novel experience. The people could not understand this, and failed to see why any one should

make such a dangerous journey, and especially why any one should all the time take notes about them, as they supposed. Accordingly, with true Oriental logic, they concluded that we had some secret purpose which must be opposed to their interests. Our own servants were equally unable to understand our purpose, although we tried to explain. I often heard them telling inquisitive villagers that they did not know what we were doing: "Perhaps they are going to make a bridge or a railroad. More likely they have a secret commission from the king. They say they are not paid for making this journey, but we know better; they are not such fools as all that. They know everything; they even know what is in a place before they have visited it."

This unlettered people's idea of geography consists in knowing the roads over which one has travelled; and they cannot understand how a man can know about a place that he has never seen, or why he should want to know, unless he expects to go there soon. These ideas about foreigners are almost the same as those which prevailed when Xenophon passed this way. America, England, France, Germany, are small cities, not nearly so important as Constantinople, near which they are located. All foreigners, or "Franks," are rich and live without working; they only come to Turkey in order to get richer and to make that country so much the poorer.

POTTERY-MAKING—A MONOPOLY.—Until the recent introduction of cheap European goods each village made most of the articles which its people required. The more difficult trades were carried on in the provincial capitals and other small cities, whose artisans often spent half the year in itinerating from village to village, taking their pay in grain, or butter and cheese. A few trades, however, such as pottery-making, have from time immemorial been restricted to certain villages. The village of Uslu makes most of the coarse red pottery used in the district, and attempts to keep a monopoly of the business, although good clay is found in other places. The women do all the pottery-making, while the men till the fields; and it is considered a disgrace for any man to be seen turning the potter's wheels, which are set under little sheds in front of every house. No girl is allowed to learn the art until she is married, for she might marry someone from another village, and so the monopoly would be destroyed. After a girl is married, and has learned to make pottery, she is compelled to remain in Uslu.

THE CUSTOM OF SACRIFICE—A REMNANT OF PAGANISM.—One more strange custom, common to Mohammedan Turks, Shiah Kurds, and Christian Armenians, is that of sacrifice—a remnant of the religion that preceded Christianity and Mohammedanism. One of the many places where sacrifices are offered, and the largest of the four or five that I have seen, is on Mushar mountain, close to the Euphrates River, opposite Malatia. Here, in a small cave, said to be the grave of a man called Hassan, a room has been made with mud walls, and has been furnished with many gaudy and some valuable offerings. Outside is a great square altar of rough stones, all covered with the gore of the scores of annual sacrifices slaughtered here by both Christians and Mohammedans, and cooked in huge copper caldrons hung from great beams. The horns are piled on another great altar, and the meat is often eaten at a sacrificial feast in the holy place, where the bones are thrown into a filthy little cave back of the main room. The shrine has no guardian, but is regarded with such veneration by men of all religions that the most valuable offerings are perfectly safe from pillagers.

Some distance below this shrine is another, the grave of a Christian girl, around which the Aghas of the Kuzzilbash village, at the foot of the mountain, are privileged to be buried, although the common people must lay their dead near the village. Close by is a large bush covered with fluttering rags. My Armenian servant tore a little strip from the bottom of his short striped tunic and tied it with the other rags.

“Are you sick?” I asked.

“Oh, no, but I may have a pain some day, and this will drive it away.”

Such holy trees or bushes are found everywhere by the roadside or on hilltops, as are also great piles of stones, on which the pious traveller throws a pebble and thus gains credit in heaven.

Mohammedan cemeteries—those most dismal, repellent, verdureless wastes of stones—are located close to the roads, because, as my interpreter said, when I was first in the country, the people want to be buried near the road, so that every passer-by may “tell a pray” (say a prayer) for them.

Even among townsfolk superstitious practices are very common. One night in Harput I heard what seemed to be the sound of merrymaking in a house nearby. All through the night drums were beat, fifes were blown, and there was high, shrill singing and clapping of hands in time to it. In the morning inquiry was made as to whether the cause of the festivities was a marriage, a funeral, a

christening, or a simple feast. It proved to be something much more unusual. Some weeks before a woman and her boy had been bitten by a mad dog, and the woman had already died, although the boy showed no signs of sickness. That day, being the fortieth since he was bitten, was considered critical, so in the evening all the friends of the family gathered with drums and other preparations for a good time. One would naturally suppose that they had come together to rejoice because the boy was still living, or else to mourn because the mother had died; but their purpose was nothing of the kind. They came to keep the boy from falling asleep, because their superstitious belief is that if a person who has been bitten by a mad dog sleeps on the fortieth night after the event he will surely die. If he does not sleep he is safe. The boy did not sleep that night.

Such are a few of the characteristics of the people and land where the great River Euphrates reaches its full size. It is a land of great natural beauty and wonderful resources—a land combining in a rare degree the advantages of a superb climate, splendid though much-abused opportunities for agriculture, mountains full of ore for the miner, and streams which might furnish immense water-power for the manufacturer. Yet, in spite of all these advantages, two thirds of the people are scarcely more enlightened than they were 2,000 years ago. It is the living, not the dead, who need that the traveller “tell a pray” for them.